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## **A Critique of the Culture of the Masses in Ortega Y Gasset's Philosophy**

*“Europe is suffering from the greatest crisis that can afflict peoples, nations, and civilization. Its characteristics and consequences are well known. So also its name. It is called the rebellion of the masses.”*

Ortega y Gasset

In the contemporary rapidly advancing technological, information, and consumer society, discussions about a decline of the culture of Western civilization are becoming more extensive. Many culture analysts observe that the flourishing of culture and its status in society enables the right moral and value education of society and personality, therefore cultural crisis is closely connected not only with the condition of society but also with a moral quality of every individual's life. In the postmodern world, a rapid expansion of globalization and technological advancement reinforces rationalism and materialism and stimulate tendencies of cultural leveling and the commodification of culture. Different social and economic changes form mass consumer culture while shaking the foundations of traditional values. This context reveals that at the present moment critical investigations of the world of culture are relevant and essential.

Thus, in order to better understand the current situation of West European culture and the future prospects of its development, it is worth looking back at those most discerning Western thinkers who already in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were able to perceive the impending cul-

tural decline and assess the future manifestations of cultural crisis in society. “Cultural crisis has been discussed by quite a few cultural critics of different theoretical orientations. Many of them did not even use the term “crisis.” As a matter of fact, the theme of cultural crises is feasible only as a problem of historical crises.”<sup>1</sup> On the theoretical and historiosophical basis, a critique of culture was formed due to the influence of non-classical philosophical tradition in the philosophy of life which emerged at that time, as well as in the works of such thinkers as Friedrich Nietzsche, Oswald Spengler, Ortega y Gasset, also in the creation of Georg Simmel, Ludwig Klages, Henri Bergson, Karl Jaspers, Albert Schweitzer, Nikolai Berdyaev, Vosylius Sesemann and other cultural philosophers. In the works of the mentioned thinkers there reveal many dramatic shifts in the development of Western culture at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> c., and tendencies of the further development of the history of Western culture are originally interpreted.

One of the greatest above-mentioned explorers of culture was a Spanish philosopher Ortega who metaphorically described Western cultural crisis emerging in his surroundings as the “revolt of the masses.” His culturological ideas made a considerable impact on the further development of Western cultural theory. In many respects, Ortega’s ideas are unquestionably significant and pertinent, they help evaluate the present state of Western culture in the context of mass consumer society. Analyzing this thinker’s rich and multilayered cultural heritage, it should be observed that his philosophy of culture is first of all close to the tradition of the philosophy of life and existential thinking as well as modern philosophy of culture which developed from Fr. Nietzsche’s ideas.

The aim of this article is to reveal the fundamental principles of Ortega y Gasset’s critique of Western culture, to examine tendencies of the emergence of mass culture, its main features and ethical principles, to demonstrate how cultural crisis is affected by a new phenomenon –

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<sup>1</sup> See more: L. Donskis, *Moderniosios kultūros filosofijos metmenys [An Outline of the Modern Philosophy of Culture]*, Vilnius 2009, p. 9.

the accession of the masses which prompts the distortion of the forms of social and cultural life of society, a man's growing alienation and the deepening spiritual crisis of personality. The article also explores a close connection between culture and man's everyday life which determines culture's vitality and the authenticity of human existence.

## **I. Ortega y Gasset's culturological ideas in the present context**

In view of the present context, probably one of the most unique Ortega's contributions to the development of the philosophy of Western culture is "The Revolt of the Masses" (*La rebelión de las masas*). In this work Ortega adopts the culturological ideas formulated by A. Schopenhauer, Fr. Nietzsche, H. Bergson, O. Spengler, and M. Heidegger and presents a unique analysis of Western culture disclosing the evolution of self-consciousness of West European society, showing tendencies of the emergence of mass culture and its possible dangers. Many contemporary cultural philosophies and sociologists proclaim a crisis of fundamental cultural values and principles which signals the critical spiritual state of man and society. In this context, Ortega's critique of culture and analysis of the theory of the masses makes one think deeply about the existential situation of contemporary man's personality as well as the destructive possibilities of modern technologies and mass media to level man's value orientations and manipulate the demands of society. Moreover, Ortega's philosophical insights point to the essential changes in the consciousness of man in Western society, his private life, culture, and civilization. It could be argued that one important task of the philosophy of culture is not only to collect data, generalize, systematize different cultural theories but "first of all, to pose "perennial" questions of the existence of culture, to ground the importance of religion, art,

philosophy, ethical and aesthetic ideals to the development and spread of culture.”<sup>2</sup>

In this respect, a critical glance at Ortega’s philosophy of culture is significant because his philosophy is a struggle with the cult of consumption promoted by the culture of the masses and superficial stereotypes which, through the modern means of mass media, enter man’s consciousness and undermine his individuality, religiousness, concern about the meaning of existence. Moreover, proclaiming the epoch of the “revolt of the masses,” Ortega sought to arouse man’s self-consciousness, to turn his attention to a human’s inner world and to show the meaning and significance of cultural, religious values in everyday life. The philosopher boldly and openly declares a critical situation of Western culture and the destructive effect of the culture of the masses as a pseudo-culture. In this way, he seeks to revive the important aspects of the existence of West European culture, including philosophy, art, social relations, social norms, religion, politics. In his attempt to resuscitate the dying Western culture, Ortega sought to foster a new elitist culture the basis of which are the fundamental values of truth, justice, faith, goodness, beauty, love. These spiritual humanist values in Ortega’s philosophy of culture are perceived as the basis for man’s life and the survival of culture, society, history. The mentioned aspects reveal the thinker’s conviction that society which is not guided by high cultural, religious, spiritual ideals, despite great technological achievements, is doomed to a moral downfall.

In his observations of social and value changes, Ortega conveys effectively the dramatic experience of the culture of his time which helps perceive a critical situation of culture in the contemporary Western civilization. Ortega remarks that we are living in a West European society which extols technological advance and in which “all power is in the hands of the masses.”<sup>3</sup> Considering the principles of the policy and

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<sup>2</sup> A. Andrijauskas, *Kultūrologijos istorija ir teorija [History and Theory of Cultural Studies]*, Vilnius 2003, p. 65.

<sup>3</sup> Ch. Ortega y Gasset, *Masių sukilimas [The Revolt of the Masses]*, Vilnius 1993, p. 19.

action of the masses, we can see that they are directed against religion, traditional values, law and justice. Thus, the “accession of the masses” marks a crisis of West European culture and values. Declaring this critical state of society, Ortega “claims it to be an indisputable postulate.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, to Ortega, the phenomenon of “the society of the masses” is a manifestation of social phenomenon which is obviously marked by such factors as a huge number of the masses and their increasing significance and influence in social life. A man drawn into a powerful stream of the masses undermines his individuality and loses the possibility to think independently and make his own decisions. The culture of the masses rejects spiritual and traditional values. Therefore as a result, there is a spread of immorality and self-will both in social and private life – the phenomena which are treated as principles of man’s freedom. Culture’s becoming more liberal is guided by commercial incentives, which results in its commodification and demoralization of society. In view of these Ortega’s attitudes, it can be asserted that the culture of the masses is oriented to man’s depersonalization and the devaluation of humanist culture. All this destroys forms of authentic social life and culture and has an impact on man’s growing alienation. The analogous destructive value and cultural changes in the present period of time are a visible sign of the consolidation of the masses in society.

## II. The Culture of the Masses and the Mass-Man

In Ortega’s philosophy of culture, the conception of the culture of the masses, its detrimental and destructive effect is best revealed through a critique of “the mass-man’s” personality and worldview. Who is “the mass-man”? Ortega in his famous work “The Revolt of the Masses,” divides all West European society into two layers: *the mass*

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<sup>4</sup> See more: A. Andrijauskas, *Ortegos y Gasseto kultūros ir meno filosofija* [Ortega y Gasset's Philosophy of Culture and Art], In: „Mūsų laikų tema ir kitos esė“, Vilnius 1999, p. 525.

and *spiritual elite*. Although at first glance ortegian division of society into two groups would seem rather radical and based on the principle of quantity, a more thorough analysis of the philosopher's thought reveals that it is not a division of people into two social hierarchical classes according to material wealth, inherited privileges, duties or other physical advantages.<sup>5</sup> By this divide Ortega seeks to single out two different types of human personality. In other words, Ortega's criteria of dividing all members of society into *the mass* and *spiritual elite* are features of man's inner personality – his self-consciousness, mentality, psychology, a way of life, principles of behaviour, and value orientations. These insights suggest that in his philosophy of culture, Ortega paid special attention to a concrete individual in an attempt to develop his self-consciousness and inner personality.

From the comparative aspect, the very name "*the mass-man*" implies that these people are in the majority. They are representatives of society who are always complacent, they "go with the stream of life," do not seek to attain a moral ideal, do not wish to go deep into cultural, religious issues, reflect on the real value of life but are guided by outer stereotypes. Speaking about a spiritual elite, they are in the minority. These people are moral and noble personalities, they do not shun difficulties and duties and make great demands on themselves and their existence. Carrying on the development of Nietzsche's cultural ideas, Ortega pays special attention to the type of the mass-man, the analysis of his psychology. "Nietzsche can be regarded as one of the first theorists and critics who inquired into the negative aspects of modern culture. He elaborated on a critique of mass culture and society, which is perhaps the first consistent critique of this kind. Nietzsche described mass culture as a power of decadence and nihilism asserting that the masses lead to the crowd's conformism, produce mass manipulation

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<sup>5</sup> See more: V. Asakavičiūtė, *Masės žmogaus ir dvasios elito priešprieša Ortegosa y Gasseto gyvenimo filosofijoje* [*An Opposition between Mass Individual and Spiritual Elite in Ortega Y Gasset's Life Philosophy*], „Logos“, 79: 2014, pp. 20-32.

and uniformity which is detrimental to human individuality.”<sup>6</sup> Ortega in his theory of mass culture also focuses his attention on a critique of the mass-man's mentality, his ethical principles. In the philosopher's view, the mass-man is concerned only about his own personal well-being, “desires different pleasures, forcibly imposes his will, refuses to help or serve others, does not comply and is preoccupied only with himself, his whims, his wardrobe.”<sup>7</sup> It is not surprising that “holding onto such moral and social values, the mass-man feels he is the center of the world – he has no consideration for others, does not appreciate any ideals, rights, and authorities.”<sup>8</sup> Such inability to open oneself to the world, to see and recognize another man's freedom and his needs bespeaks the mass man's estrangement and egoism.

The question arises: where are the roots of the culture of the masses or, in other words, what caused such a change of principles of psyche and behaviour? The Spanish thinker finds the answer to this question in the 19<sup>th</sup> century – it is liberal democracy and technological advancement. It should be noted that Nietzsche also argues that “modern democracy, liberalism and educative social movements contributed to the “modern man's” regress, especially due to the influence of the press and mass culture which stipulated intemperance, sensuality, and blind conformity to the existing order.”<sup>9</sup> In Ortega's view, these factors favourable to the development of civilization, created a well-provided social, economical structure of human life in the 19<sup>th</sup> c., however, all individual's essential religious and spiritual needs remained suppressed. Ortega writes: “This age taught one to take pride in the power of technology, but it kept silent

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<sup>6</sup> See more: V. P. Stanković, *The project Skopje 2014 from the perspective of mass culture criticism of F. Nietzsche*, “Creativity Studies“, 8(1): 2015, pp. 58-71.

<sup>7</sup> Ch. Ortega y Gasset, *Masių sukilimas [The Revolt of the Masses]*, Vilnius 1993, p. 33.

<sup>8</sup> V. Asakavičiūtė, *Masės žmogaus ir dvasios elito priešprieša Ortegos y Gasseto gyvenimo filosofijoje [An Opposition between Mass Individual and Spiritual Elite in Ortega Y Gasset's Life Philosophy]*, „Logos“, 79: 2014, p. 23.

<sup>9</sup> See more: V. P. Stanković, *The project Skopje 2014 from the perspective of mass culture criticism of F. Nietzsche*, “Creativity Studies“, 8(1): 2015, pp. 58-71.

about the spirit.”<sup>10</sup> According to A. Andrijauskas, “Ortega’s critique is also directed against totalitarianism which appeared in Europe in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and which “substituted justice for the principle of force.” The strengthening of totalitarian power here is directly related to cultural crisis and consolidation of the authority of the masses.”<sup>11</sup>

Eminent German culturologist and philosopher Oswald Spengler in his famous work “The Decline of the West”<sup>12</sup> (*Der Untergang des Abendlandes*), writes that a crisis and the end of Western culture is marked by the establishment of an era of civilization. Civilization is engineering and technologies, an artificial construction which stipulates an emphasis on the immense significance of intellect, it is estranged from man’s spirit whereas culture, on the contrary, signifies individuality, genuineness, freedom, traditions, religiousness. Therefore a more thorough analysis of reasons and tendencies of the rise of mass culture reveals Ortega’s belief that city industry and an attitude to technology as an absolute, changes man’s self-consciousness. Material well-being, scientific progress reinforce false ideas of progress – tomorrow, the world will be richer and more perfect.”<sup>13</sup> Because of man’s confidence in such an inevitably progressive life, his spirit “grows lazy,” he does not care about the future and feels he can control the environment, nature, all history. Such an “illusion of security” suppressed the tragic existential dimension within a man. However, facts testify that no progress or evolution is unshakeable; - they are always in danger of retrogression, of going back. For life – individual or collective, personal or historic – is the one entity in the universe whose substance is compact of danger.

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<sup>10</sup> Ch. Ortega y Gasset, *Masių sukilimas* [*The Revolt of the Masses*], Vilnius 1993, p. 69.

<sup>11</sup> A. Andrijauskas, *Kultūros, filosofijos ir meno profiliai (Rytai – Vakariai – Lietuva)* [*Outlines of Culture, Philosophy, and Art (East – West – Lithuania)*], Vilnius 2004, p. 354.

<sup>12</sup> See more: O. Шпенглер, *Закат Европы* [*The Decline of the West*], Москва 1993.

<sup>13</sup> Ch. Ortega y Gasset, *Masių sukilimas* [*The Revolt of the Masses*], Vilnius 1993, p. 63.

<...> It is, in the strictest sense of the word, drama.”<sup>14</sup> The tragic nature of life, according to Ortega, is an important source of man's improvement and creation, for it revivifies human existence, stimulates struggle, faith, and individual choice. Therefore the culture of the masses which attaches the greatest importance to material rather than spiritual values and extols the well-being of external life, brings up “the pauper of the soul.” And the overstocked market, mass information media stimulate man's unquenchable thirst for sensual pleasures, egoism, ingratitude, indifference, repudiation of all authorities and objective norms. Thus changes of the environment, according to Ortega, determine value changes of man's life. Man's personality becomes shallow, full of pride – *living only for its own pleasure*.<sup>15</sup> The mass-man's attitude to life can be described by the principle *to take and consume* and not *to give or share*. Drawing on this Ortega's critique, the mass-man can be called a *consumer* and the culture of the masses – *a consumer culture*.

As it has already been mentioned, Ortega proclaims a diagnosis of Western culture as “the revolt of the masses.” The question arises: what do they revolt against and what are the consequences of this revolt? The analysis of principles of Ortega's philosophy of culture shows that the masses seek self-will, entertainment, a comfortable, “enjoyable life without any restrictions and responsibilities.” Therefore, the revolt of the masses is a “moral upheaval,” a rebellion against traditional values, culture, religion, justice, the highest principles of goodness. It is easy to predict whereto West Europe directs its course when it becomes clear that such social norms are dictated by the mass-man. The revolt of the masses leads to the depreciation of traditional hierarchical values that were dominant for many centuries, and as a result, society loses the right criteria of life and goodness.

In Ortega's view, culture begins to fall into decline when man loses his interest in culture for its own sake, for the main cultural values and principles. We can argue that “mass culture is mass produced for

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 92.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

mass consumption, a notion which stems from technologies capable of supporting such production. The purpose of this process is cultural commodification.”<sup>16</sup> Therefore in mass culture everything is oriented around selling, profit, and quantity. Thus mass created products focus not on value and quality but on copying and standardization. Cultural values go down because the creation of cultural products becomes trade. Disclosing the effect of technologies and mass culture on the development of art, Ortega broaches the subject of the dehumanization of art.<sup>17</sup> In other words, “any artistic style which excludes human values from the core of a work of art, is dehumanized.”<sup>18</sup> Hence modern technologies affect not only man’s soul, his existence but also a world of art.<sup>19</sup> As a result, a work of art becomes just a commodity the content and value of which is dictated by the mass consumer demand. “Elite culture, on the contrary, educates and cultivates the spectator or listener, i.e. a consumer. In other words, elite culture teaches the art of not consuming.”<sup>20</sup> Romantics and representatives of non-classical philosophy observed that it is through music and works of art that the meaning of human existence and mysteries of being and beauty are best revealed. Works of art have to educate a man and cherish values of goodness. It is obvious that a crisis of art and creative activity manifests itself in art’s losing its natural function and becoming just entertainment for the masses to satisfy their taste and interests.

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<sup>16</sup> J. O’Sullivan, *Modernist Intermediality: The False Dichotomy between High Modernism and Mass Culture*, “English Studies”, 98(3): 2017, p. 285.

<sup>17</sup> J. Ortega y Gasset, *Meno dehumanizavimas [The Dehumanization of Art]*, In: „Mūsų laikų tema ir kitos esė“, Vilnius 1999, p. 485.

<sup>18</sup> A. Andrijauskas, *Ortega y Gasseto meno dehumanizacijos teorija [Ortega y Gasset’s Theory of the Dehumanization of Art]*, In: „Grožis ir menas. Estetikos ir meno filosofijos idėjų istorija“, Vilnius 1996, p. 636.

<sup>19</sup> See more: Z. Paic, *Technology and the Soul. Jose Ortega y Gasset and the Question about the Meaning of Art*, “FILOZOFSKA ISTRAZIVANJA”, 35: 2015, Issue 4, pp. 657-672.

<sup>20</sup> T. Kačerauskas, *Elitinė ir masinė kultūra medijų sąlygomis [Elite and mass culture under the conditions of media]*, „Logos“, 89: 2016, p. 57.

Thus, viewed from the perspective of Ortega's philosophy of culture, "the revolt of the masses" effects catastrophic changes in culture. The sign of mass culture is uniformity and standardization. Proclaiming the cult of beauty, it views profit and a desire for fame as man's ultimate aim.

### **III. Elite culture: principles and values**

Seeking a solution to the problem of cultural crisis, Ortega, like R. Fiedler, F. Nietzsche, S. Mallarmé, P. Valéry, argued that the declining Western culture can be resuscitated only by a new elite culture which would be created by the minority – noble people who would resolutely dissociate themselves from the leveling effect of the culture of the masses, their principles of action and worldview. Only by creating a spiritual culture, according to Ortega, we will be able to arrive at a positive solution to cultural crisis.

History reveals that the development of culture is never linear – changes and decline are inevitable. According to T. Kačerauskas, "alternation between the roles of elite and mass culture in society is the necessary aspect of culture dynamics. Elite culture can be understood not so much as an antipode of mass culture, but as an example set to it, this, what directs the masses and makes them align with it."<sup>21</sup>

Hence, elite culture which is founded on the principal all-human humanistic values foster morally strong, responsible, conscious and noble personalities who can serve as a model to society and an incentive for culture's resuscitation. With regard to Ortega, the important life principles and mission of a noble man is service to others, the authority, God. "Therefore, unlike the mass-man, a noble, strong-willed, spiritual man suppresses his biological instincts or emotional whims and tries to

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

control and know himself.”<sup>22</sup> A noble man aims at self-creation, spiritual development, he explores his own inner world and makes great demands on himself. Thus from Ortega’s viewpoint, authentic culture has to stimulate and foster these essential principles of human life – service to others, the ability to give, share, and sacrifice oneself for others.

In expounding on the theory of elite culture and a noble man’s worldview, Ortega takes a perspectivist attitude. This position emphasizes man’s intuitive experience and his personal responsibility for culture and life. The basis of human existence is not universality but individuality, as our “life is the life of lives and also the problem of problems.”<sup>23</sup> These problems do not have patterns and standards of solution, they are always individual because they arise from situations and circumstances characteristic of every human being. For this reason, only this culture is authentic which encourages man to delve into a much deeper plane of individual existence. The philosopher maintains that man’s social life is an artificial, superficial, external layer of life and reality. Ortega writes metaphorically that “life is an eternal text, a blazing wayside bush which echoes the voice of God.”<sup>24</sup> Such an attitude reveals that life is not only the material surface, - the Spirit of God lies in it. And in order to hear the voice of God, one needs faith, inner yearning, and openness. Therefore a real authentic life is in solitude, a life lived within, only this life fills human existence with beauty and love. And this is why “Ortega describes man’s exploration of his inner self as the main characteristics of human personality, a result of his ultimate choice.”<sup>25</sup> Mass culture not only rejects this spiritual intuitive reality, but also deprives man of his free choice while imposing general, artificial standards. Things

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<sup>22</sup> V. Asakavičiūtė, *Masės žmogaus ir dvasios elito priešprieša Ortegos y Gasseto gyvenimo filosofijoje* [*An Opposition between Mass Individual and Spiritual Elite in Ortega Y Gasset’s Life Philosophy*], „Logos“, 79: 2014, p. 24.

<sup>23</sup> Ch. Ortega y Gasset, *Masių sukilimas* [*The Revolt of the Masses*], Vilnius 1993, p. 58.

<sup>24</sup> J. Ortega y Gasset, *Meditacijos apie Don Kichotą* [*Meditations on Quixote*], In: „Mūsų laikų tema ir kitos esė“, Vilnius 1999, p. 53.

<sup>25</sup> A. Andrijauskas, *Ortegos y Gasseto kultūros ir meno filosofija* [*Ortega y Gasset’s Philosophy of Culture and Art*], In: „Mūsų laikų tema ir kitos esė“, Vilnius 1999, p. 526.

propagated and advertised through mass media overwhelm human consciousness, stimulate man to focus on the outer rather than the inner world. Cultural philosopher V. Sesemann<sup>26</sup>, like Ortega, in his analysis of cultural crisis relates it with the problem of self-knowledge. Here self-knowledge is defined as practical and moral self-improvement. According to V. Sesemann, goodness cannot be taught because it can be gained only through self-knowledge. It is an inner act of the soul which encompasses man's experiences, feelings, and will. Cultural crisis arises when this moral self-cognition is forgotten and only the objective scientific knowledge is emphasized.

It should be noted that in Ortega's philosophy of culture, religion is an important foundation of cultural values. The principles of religious culture were espoused by A. Maceina, V. Berteyav, V. Sesemann and many other cultural philosophers. Christian thinker V. Berdyaiev<sup>27</sup> points out that the reason of cultural crisis is that culture cannot remain religiously neutral because having dissociated itself from God, culture negates itself. It becomes anti-humane. Cultural philosopher A. Maceina affirms that culture is the support of religion, and religion is the completion of culture; through culture Christianity fulfils its task to make the world God's temple."<sup>28</sup> A. Maceina extols man's natural creative power as God the Creator's gift, - "here man's creative work blends with God's creation to carry on the work of the completion of the world."<sup>29</sup> The significance of religious culture was also defended by J. Girnius<sup>30</sup> who claimed that technological achievements without God, values and morality can destroy man and society. In this way, J. Girnius

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<sup>26</sup> See more: V. Sezemanas, *Filosofijos istorija. Kultūra* [A History of Philosophy. Culture], In: Raštai, Vilnius 1997.

<sup>27</sup> See more: Н. Бердяевъ, *Философия творчества, культуры и искусства*. т. 1 [The Philosophy of Creative Work, Culture, and Art], Москва 1994.

<sup>28</sup> A. Maceina, *Kultūros tragizmas* [The Tragic Element of Culture], In: Raštai, t. 9, Vilnius 2004, p. 158.

<sup>29</sup> See more: A. Maceina, *Kultūros filosofijos įvadas* [Introduction to the Philosophy of Culture], In: Raštai, t. 1, Vilnius 1991.

<sup>30</sup> See more: J. Girnius, *Žmogus be Dievo* [Man without God], In: Raštai, t. 2, Vilnius 1994.

wants to show that technological progress does not necessarily reflect man's spiritual and cultural advance. On the contrary, technology often produces "death culture" which can carry out moral and physical crimes with respect to individual or society on a grand scale. V. Pruskus in his analysis of cultural and religious phenomena, their interrelationship in a historical, social, and global context, observes that the impact of religion on culture is unquestionable. "The creation of culture is hardly possible without spiritual aspirations supported by religion. Religion helps the individual not only to preserve his identity in the face of different social transformations, but also to defend human dignity and a person's worth."<sup>31</sup>

Therefore, in examining manifestations of mass culture, Ortega observes that the supply and stereotypes of "mass culture" pose a big threat to authentic culture, as they are absolutely unconcerned with religion and God. The Western world, affected by the consumerist and pragmatic spirit, is disposed to materialism and secularization. Having rejected religion, culture loses stability, authority, its values become subject to the outer circumstances and the majority's opinion. Although mass culture attempts to propagate the idea that material wealth alone guarantees social progress, however, "living values" which stem from culture and religion are also essential. As Ortega remarks, "the phenomenon of man's life is two-faced – biological and spiritual."<sup>32</sup>

#### IV. Culture and life

In his philosophy of culture, Ortega puts forward a critical proposition that in the Western society of the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century there prevails a very objective attitude to culture as a system and because of that "culture becomes only an empty fiction, a layer above the real life,"

<sup>31</sup> V. Pruskus, *Krikščionybė ir kultūra* [*Christianity and Culture*], Vilnius 2016, p. 7.

<sup>32</sup> J. Ortega y Gasset, *Mūsų laikų tema ir kitos esė* [*The Theme of our Time*], Vilnius 1999, p. 178.

remote from man's everyday life. This rationalist cultural position was also criticized by his predecessors F. Nietzsche, O. Spengler, G. Simmel as well as other representatives of the philosophy of culture. Culture detached from life falls into decline, suffers crisis as it does not conform with the problems and needs of man's spiritual life.

Therefore, Ortega argues that one of the main reasons of a crisis in culture and art is a dominant rationalist worldview stimulated by mass culture which denied the spiritual realm of man and reality, detached culture from life. "Culture cannot be governed solely by objective laws, it also conforms to the laws of life."<sup>33</sup> In the work *The Theme of our Time (El tema de nuestro tiempo)*, Ortega devoted much attention to deep relations between life and culture. Ortega remarks that "there is no culture without life and spirituality without the soul."<sup>34</sup> Culture forms man's living environment, therefore it is an important factor which determines a way of life and values.

In this context, we observe Ortega's apt insight, as the contemporary investigations of culture indicate that in its broadest sense, culture can be defined as a way of man's life and activity.<sup>35</sup> Culture rests upon a living, creating and thinking individual because culture is and has always been a universal sphere of man's creative work and other diverse activity. "Therefore the concept of culture is very broad and it encompasses tradition, religion, letters, works of art, moral norms, philosophical ideas, manifestations of political power, law codes, scientific achievements and many other products of man's creative activity."<sup>36</sup>

Ortega forms the genealogy of culture which reveals that culture arises from forms of life and is very spontaneous, subjective. And when culture moves away from life, i.e. when it is not practically applied in forms of life, its vital flow ceases, it becomes dry and ritualized. In other

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 179.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 178.

<sup>35</sup> J. Baetens, *Cultural studies after the cultural studies paradigm*, "Cultural Studies", 19(1): 2005, p. 2.

<sup>36</sup> A. Andrijauskas, *Kultūrologijos istorija ir teorija [History and Theory of Cultural Studies]*, Vilnius 2003, p. 128.

words, “culture survives only when it is continually being affected by the subject’s vitality. If this circulation gets disturbed, culture moves away and quickly dries up.”<sup>37</sup> Therefore one major goal of Ortega’s philosophy of culture is to *make culture serve the world*, to integrate culture with man. Ortega argues a link between culture and human life and points out that “life has to be cultured and culture has to be life-giving.”<sup>38</sup> Here cultured life can be perceived as a result of hard spiritual and creative work.

To Ortega, the important criterion of cultural progress is man’s and society’s spiritual richness, creativity, and independence. Therefore Ortega’s encouragement to create an elite culture whose representatives would maintain and create the right foundations of thinking and values in society, arise from the attempts to overcome a crisis caused by mass culture. Jesús Conill Sancho observes that “to Ortega, life is not an adjustment to mediocrity and uniformity, as from the very beginning life is creation, a creative experiment.”<sup>39</sup> The thriving mass culture diminishes man’s creative potential, as it enforces the already formulated standards and goals of actions, behaviour, goodness, beauty, and even life. Unthinkingly, man accepts them as ultimate and right, and then he cannot grow spiritually, create values, reflect on the world and his place in it. Ortega was convinced that man can and must resist these standards of mass culture and thus preserve his uniqueness. An authentic, cultured life demands man’s personal efforts, responsibility, consciousness. Ortega points out that every man has to seek individual seeing and understanding, i.e. *active looking*. It is an intuitive, open and deep looking, the one of a devoutly religious man “who says he beholds God looking at the meadow in bloom or the starry face of the night.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> J. Ortega y Gasset, *Mūsų laikų tema ir kitos esė* [*The Theme of our Time*], Vilnius 1999, p. 182-183.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 179.

<sup>39</sup> J. C. Sancho, *Ratiovitalistic hermeneutics and sport in the perspective of Ortega y Gasset*, “Sport, Ethics and Philosophy“, 10(4): 2016, p. 418.

<sup>40</sup> J. Ortega y Gasset, *Meno dehumanizavimas* [*The Dehumanization of Art*], In: „Mūsų laikų tema ir kitos esė“, Vilnius 1999, p. 29.

A man like this is able to penetrate through the chaotic surface of things and phenomena and reach the depth of seeing, the depth of reality – God. This Ortega's attitude reveals that morality, religion, high ideals, truth, and beauty are "live ideas" lurking in the depth of reality, they reveal themselves to a man not as the external objective and universal reality but through man's intuitive experience and efforts of will.

As a counter to man's activity, Ortega speaks about "passive looking" typical of the mass-man. This is a worldview of the man who discerns only the surface of reality. Merely imitating other people's actions or words, such a mass-man lives a *pseudo-life*. This is an abstract life – not genuine, unauthentic, not free, it is imposed on him and based on a fictitious reality. M. Heidegger calls it "*Das Man* chaos, when it is not we who think or speak but somebody else thinks and speaks for us."<sup>41</sup> Ortega warns against such depersonalization claiming that "everyone of us is in danger of not being one's own self – the only and integral Me. The greater part of people constantly betrays this self."<sup>42</sup>

Thus, in summing up, it can be argued that Ortega views the world of culture as a live, changing phenomenon. It is such a system of ideas about the world and man which essentially differs from scientific ideas. Man knows scientific ideas whereas he lives with cultural ideas, creates himself and his relation with others and the surroundings. Therefore he describes cultural ideas and values as "live." These "live ideas" are fundamental and we do not discover them only by thinking rationally about reality. These are values by which we exist, which we believe, they are not objective, anonymous, but meaningful to a human being, therefore "we have to desire and to seek them." Through man's inner efforts culture and human life merge, as cultural values become part of man's innermost self and life. In this way, Ortega grounds his belief that man is called to create himself and his cultural surroundings. Culture reveals artistic, religious, social, intellectual values which determine the

<sup>41</sup> T. Kačerauskas, *Tikrovė ir Kūryba. Kultūros fenomenologijos metmenys* [Reality and Creation. Sketches of Cultural Phenomenology], Vilnius 2008, p. 70.

<sup>42</sup> See more: X. Ортега и Гассет, *Человек и люди* [Man and People], In: „Дегуманизация искусства и другие работы“, Москва 1991.

goal and meaning of human life, the society's spiritual development as well as a historical progress. Thus it is through culture that man's life and society attain mental equilibrium and the right value orientations. For this reason, Ortega views religion as the mainstay of cultural values which ensures the stability of the foundations of culture and prevents man, society, and even history from losing criteria of goodness and truth.

The mass-man perceives culture as a "self-contained given", he is no longer the creator of culture but only its passive, easily manipulated consumer. Having no reference points in the sphere of religious and cultural life leads to the loss of spirituality and man's depersonalization. Stimulating the commodification of cultural values and society's secularization, the society of the masses and mass information media form the cult of mediocrity and consumerism as well as aggravate the deepening crisis of man's personality. Therefore in Ortega's philosophy of culture, mass culture assumes *the form of anti-culture* – it destroys everything that is human, spiritual, eternal.

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## **A Critique of the Culture of the Masses in Ortega Y Gasset's Philosophy**

### Summary

The aim of the article is to reveal the fundamental propositions of a critique of the culture of the masses developed in the philosophy of a prominent Spanish thinker José Ortega y Gasset, to explore the main tendencies, features and ethical principles of the coming of the masses in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The article consists of four parts. The first two parts explore the sources and manifestations of cultural crisis in society which are disclosed through a critique of the mass-man's worldview. It is argued that cultural crisis is caused by the accession of the masses and their growing influence in social life, which, in essence, undermines the foundations of authentic culture and spiritual values. From the perspective of this thinker's cultural philosophy, an attempt is made to assess the present state of Western culture in the context of mass consumer society. At the end of the article an emphasis is laid on a link between culture and man's life as well as culture and creative activity, which helps define the conception of elite culture in Ortega's philosophy. The conclusion is made that through the commodification of cultural symbols and values mass culture disseminates anti-cultural, anti-religious, and anti-life ideas which are detrimental to a man's spiritual development, social ethics, and the development of the history of civilization.

Key words: Ortega y Gasset, cultural theory, the culture of the masses, cultural crisis, life